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ABSTRACT

There has been a significant increase in new foreign language programs at the elementary school level in recent years. Many of these programs, often referred to as foreign language in the elementary school or FLES programs, have been implemented to comply with state mandates, while others have been developed in response to parental pressure for early language learning opportunities for their children. Many of these programs risk failure, because of planning decisions that were not carefully thought out or that were based on inaccurate assumptions about foreign language learning. The purpose of this digest is to identify some common pitfalls in program planning and to focus attention on issues that must be considered in the planning stages if early foreign language programs are to succeed. Pitfalls discussed include the following: scheduling foreign language classes too infrequently or in sessions that are too short; treating foreign languages differently from other academic subjects; offering only commonly taught languages, without considering other important world languages; implementing a new program in all grades at the same time; ignoring the needs of students who enter the program in later grades; failing to plan for appropriate articulation from elementary to secondary school programs; hiring teachers who do not have both language and teaching skills; planning and scheduling the foreign language program in isolation from the general curriculum; and planning schedules and workloads that lead to teacher burnout. (VWL)

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# Planning for Success
## Common Pitfalls in the Planning of Early Foreign Language Programs

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# Planning for Success
## Common Pitfalls in the Planning of Early Foreign Language Programs

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There has been a significant increase in new foreign language programs at the elementary school level in recent years. Many of these programs, often referred to as foreign language in the elementary school or FLES programs, have been implemented to comply with state mandates, while others have been developed in response to parental pressure for early language learning opportunities for their children. The growing body of information about the cognitive and academic benefits of early bilingualism will no doubt fuel the continued development and expansion of these programs. Unfortunately, many will not succeed over an extended period of time because of planning decisions that were not carefully thought out or that were based on inaccurate assumptions about foreign language learning. The purpose of this digest is to identify some common pitfalls in program planning and to focus attention on issues that must be considered in the planning stages if early foreign language programs are to succeed.

**Pitfall: Scheduling foreign language classes too infrequently or in sessions that are too short.**

There is a widespread misperception that children learn foreign languages easily even with very limited exposure. As a result, some programs operate on the assumption that a little bit of language instruction is better than no language instruction at all. This perception contradicts the recommendations of foreign language professionals and the experience of successful programs (Gilzow & Branaman, 2000). A sequence of instruction that includes sufficient instructional time is needed for students to achieve proficiency in another language. Met and Rhodes (1990) suggest that "foreign language instruction should be scheduled daily, and for no less than 30 minutes" (p. 438). A national group of experts, convened by Goethe House New York, recommended a minimum of 75 minutes per week for any program designated as FLES; they agreed that these classes should meet all year, during the school day, at least every other day (Rosenbusch, 1992). More recently, the *ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K–12 Learners* (Swender & Duncan, 1998) proposed a higher standard: elementary programs that meet from 3 to 5 days per week for no less than 30–40 minutes per class; middle school programs that meet daily for no less than 40–50 minutes; and high school programs that equal four units of credit.

**Pitfall: Treating foreign languages differently from other academic subjects.**

In most countries around the world, languages have the same status as other academic subjects and are a regular part of the curriculum of every school. Instruction usually starts no later than Grade 5, and often earlier. Given that most of these countries are much more successful than the United States at producing adults who can speak more than one language, we would do well to follow their example. Foreign languages should be recognized as valid academic subjects and be accorded the same status and priority for instructional time as other school subjects.

**Pitfall: Offering only commonly taught languages, without considering other important world languages.**

Spanish is by far the most commonly taught language in the United States, followed by French (Rhodes & Branaman, 1999). While there is no denying the importance of these two languages both domestically and globally, there is a tremendous need for individuals who speak many other world languages. The United States interacts with virtually every nation in the world; the need for proficiency in the languages of these countries has never been higher (Brecht & Ingold, 1999). It is impossible to know which language will be most useful to any given elementary school student or which will be most important for our country in the future. It is important, therefore, to offer a variety of languages in order to provide choices for individual students and to broaden the range of languages spoken by U.S. citizens.

**Pitfall: Implementing a new program in all grades at the same time.**

There are many stresses in launching a new foreign language program at the elementary school level. Unlike teachers in other curriculum areas, foreign language teachers cannot turn to existing textbook series and standardized materials as they plan a program. This is partly because elementary school programs differ markedly from one place to another. Locating and adapting appropriate materials is a formidable task even when the language is introduced in only one or two grades at a time. If a new program is introduced in all grades at once, the task is much greater. Although all students are beginners in the first year, even introductory lessons need to be adapted to the different developmental levels of students in different grades. In the second year of the program, curriculum for every grade level after the first one needs to be written. This process continues yearly until the entire program is in place. It is much more effective to implement a new program in only one or two grades during the first year, then add another grade each year until it is in place at all levels.

**Pitfall: Ignoring the needs of students who enter the program in later grades.**

Students who enter the program after the second year require significant support to catch up with classmates who have already had 2 or more years of foreign language instruction. This support may be provided in the form of supplementary materials and additional instructional time. Without such support, newcomers are likely to experience considerable frustration and may never reach the level of language proficiency of their peers. If the proportion of newcomers to a program becomes too great, especially at more advanced levels, the language experience for all students may be diluted in a misguided attempt to make it comprehensible for the new students. Specific plans must be in place to provide appropriate support for newcomers before the language program enters its second year of operation.



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**Pitfall: Failing to plan for appropriate articulation from elementary to secondary school programs.**

Articulation issues, when postponed, can lead to the eventual disintegration of an early language program (Abbott, 1998). No child who has already studied a language for several years should be treated as a beginner after moving on to middle school. Admittedly, bridging the middle school years is a difficult challenge. Because middle schools typically receive students from several elementary schools, they may have some incoming students with extensive language experience in elementary school and others who have had no prior language instruction. This presents a significant scheduling challenge. Courses for students with prior language learning experience must be designed to build on the learning that has taken place in elementary school. If elementary school program planners involve secondary school teachers and administrators in addressing these issues in the early planning stages of their program, the potential for long-term success is much greater.

**Pitfall: Hiring teachers who do not have both language and teaching skills.**

There are two misconceptions that sometimes influence the hiring of foreign language teachers: that a native speaker is always a better choice than a teacher who has learned the language as a second language, and that teachers at beginning levels of instruction do not need the same degree of language proficiency as those who teach at more advanced levels. In reality, teachers at all levels need to be fully proficient in the language they teach. But native or near-native language proficiency is not the only requirement. Language teachers also need to be knowledgeable about second language acquisition, especially in children, and about appropriate second language teaching strategies and practices.

Teachers who cannot comfortably use the target language for classroom purposes will not be able to surround learners with language, an essential component of an effective language learning environment. They will also find it difficult to develop and create curricula and activities in the target language. Even fluent speakers of the language may be ineffective in the classroom if they are not knowledgeable about second language acquisition, child development, and teaching strategies for American elementary school students.

**Pitfall: Planning and scheduling the foreign language program in isolation from the general curriculum.**

An isolated foreign language program can justifiably be perceived as an intrusion on precious time in the elementary school day. By contrast, a content-related program can reinforce the goals of the general curriculum, provide additional practice with significant concepts, and give learners a second chance at understanding material from other curricular areas. A common characteristic of seven model early foreign language programs examined in Gilzow and Branaman (2000) is a close connection with the general elementary school curriculum.

Effective language instruction is thematic and builds on topics and contexts that are relevant to the students. These topics or contexts can vary greatly, from activities based on the regular school curriculum, such as those found in content-based or content-related instruction, to other activities typically found in early language programs, such as drama, role-play, games, songs, children's literature, folk and fairy tales, storytelling, and puppetry. All of these activities contribute to the other content areas and to the basic mission of the school, because they all contribute to the child's learning.

**Pitfall: Planning schedules and workloads that lead to teacher burnout.**

There is currently a shortage of qualified teachers for early language programs. To rectify this situation, it is imperative to build programs that are good for children and also good for teachers. With this in mind, the Georgia Department of Education stipulated that FLES teachers in state-supported model programs should teach no more than eight classes per day, leaving time for the many additional responsibilities of a FLES teacher: interacting with numerous classroom teachers, developing curriculum and materials, communicating with parents and community, and building public relations for the program.

If language teachers work under unfavorable conditions, they are likely to burn out and leave the profession or opt for regular classrooms. There are dangers in the proliferation of early language programs when attention is not given to the stress factors involved in typical teacher workloads. Elementary school language teachers may find themselves teaching as many as 14 classes in a single day, seeing as many as 600 students in a week. Their classes are often scheduled back to back, and they rarely have their own classrooms. They often lack professional support and opportunities for inservice training, and their schedules rarely allow them time to collaborate with other language teachers.

**Conclusion**

While it is not possible in this short space to address every issue involved in planning an early language program, this digest identifies a number of important considerations that program planners need to address. Many of the issues discussed here may sound familiar—they are similar to the obstacles that plagued the early language learning movement 40 years ago: a shortage of qualified teachers, a tendency to establish programs without sufficient planning or careful selection of teachers and materials, a lack of clarity about the connection between program goals and the amount of time allocated to the program, and a willingness to promise whatever the public wants to hear. In order to avoid the mistakes of the past, it is critical that program planners have a clear understanding of all of the components necessary to create a positive environment for early language teaching and learning.

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